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FOR ADOPTIVE MOM OF FIVE, THIS MOTHER'S DAY IS A DREAM WORTH GROWING, THANKS TO HEART GALLERY OF TAMPA BAY

Pact at age 15 with best friend from foster care to adopt becomes promise kept, five times over



TAMPA, FL – When Latarsha Warren was 15, she made a pact with her best friend, Tameka, who grew up in foster care, to one day adopt a child. Each girl kept her promise. Tameka adopted one child and now lives in Georgia. But Latarsha not only kept her end of the bargain, she kept it five times over.

In fact, this May 9 will be a very special Mother's Day for Latarsha, now 35, of Plant City, who will celebrate the day with her four boys and one girl, ages 11-19, all adopted out of foster care and four of whom are siblings once featured in the Heart Gallery of Tampa Bay, a collaborative program of the Children's Board of Hillsborough County and Hillsborough Kids, Inc. to help find adoptive homes for children in foster care. The Heart Gallery is a traveling photographic exhibit that includes audio messages from foster children needing adoption.

Having Chris, 11, and biological siblings Anthony, 14, Brandon, 15, Olivia, 17 and Trey, 19, for Mother's Day will help offset the fact that Latarsha's husband, Jason, flew out to basic training in Missouri on April 29.

"I love Mother's Day now; it's a celebration for me," says Latarsha. "The children give us love and respect. They hug you 50 times a day."

The hugs have been coming since 2005 when Chris and Brandon were the first ones adopted. At the time, Jason and Latarsha were dating and each was in the process of adopting a child when they decided to make it a joint effort. Each came from large, loving families; Jason had 12 sisters and two brothers and Latarsha had five sisters and three brothers.

In 2008 the Warrens adopted Brandon's biological brothers Trey and Anthony, and on Feb. 1, 2010, their sister Olivia became the seventh and final family member.

"It's been an awesome pleasure to see this family repeatedly come back to adopt another of the siblings and to see their family completed," says Hillsborough Circuit Judge Tracy Sheehan. "It is a tribute to the power of family that these teens wanted nothing more than to be adopted."

And how are they doing? They are all happy to be together and love one another, even through the challenging times of adolescence.

"Everybody who visits us laughs and has a good time with us," says Jamal.

"We're like the 2010 version of the Cosby Show except that Dad is always serious like the Cosby mom and Mom is funny and cuddly like Bill Cosby," says Trey. "We're happy but also a little sad that Dad will be gone for a while in the military."

"Olivia is the princess. She likes it; she's like the queen. And we're my Mom's and Olivia's bodyguards," says Jamal.

"It's awesome," says Latarsha.

The Children's Board of Hillsborough County serves as the leading voice and advocate for children and families in our community. The board is the only organization of its kind in Hillsborough County that generates revenue to help children and families. The Children's Board is recognized nationally for its contributions to best practices in policies and programs aiding children and families. Citizens may visit www.childrensboard.org to learn more about the board's programs.

The mission of the Heart Gallery of Tampa Bay is to enable children living in foster care in our communities to realize their dream of finding permanent, loving adoptive families to call their own, and to raise awareness and education about the hundreds of children who desperately need and deserve the shelter and love of forever homes. Visit www.heartgallerytampabay.org/ to learn more about adopting children from foster care in Hillsborough County

Editor's Note: Latarsha Warren and her family are willing and available to talk with media about their story. Weekends and weekdays after 5 p.m. are the best times to interview the entire family (except for the dad, Jason Warren, who just left for basic training in the Army). Contact Latarsha at cell phone (813) 494-2677 and notify Dan Casseday of the Children's Board at (813) 892-1239.

The family lives at 2815 Turkey Creek Road, Plant City, FL 33566. The house is located about 25 miles west of downtown Tampa. From Tampa, go I-4 east to the Forbes Road exit. Go south (right) to Rt. 92. Turn left (east) to Turkey Creek Road. Turn right (south) on Turkey Creek approximately four miles. The yellow and white house is on the right, across the street from a Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) provider and just north of an elementary school.